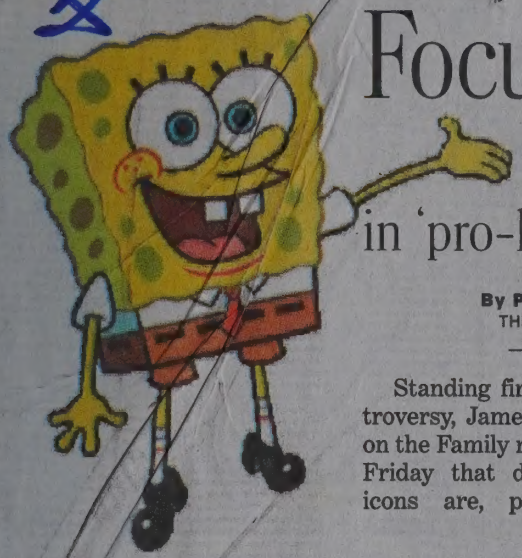

Focus: We don't dislike SpongeBob

But sponge shouldn't appear in 'pro-homosexual' video, group says

By PAUL ASAY
THE GAZETTE

Standing firm in a swirl of controversy, James Dobson and Focus on the Family reiterated their belief Friday that dozens of childhood icons are, perhaps unwittingly, pushing the acceptance of homosexuality.

But that doesn't mean Dobson thinks SpongeBob SquarePants is gay.

Dobson, founder of the Colorado Springs-based Focus on the Family, accused SpongeBob of appearing in a "pro-homosexual" video, along with more than 100 other popular children's characters, including Winnie the Pooh and the Muppets. Dobson's comments came during a black-tie dinner Tuesday in Washington, D.C.

Dobson's comments made international headlines Thursday and Friday in The New York Times, the British Broadcasting Corp., CNN

SEE SPONGEBOB • PAGE 7

SOUND OFF

See what readers think of the controversy from under the sea and add your two cents at gazette.com.

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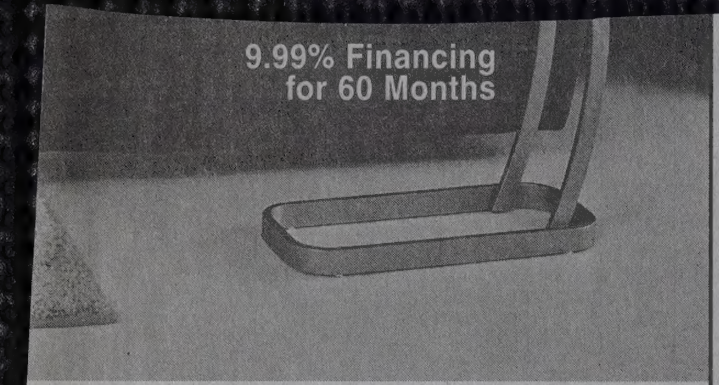

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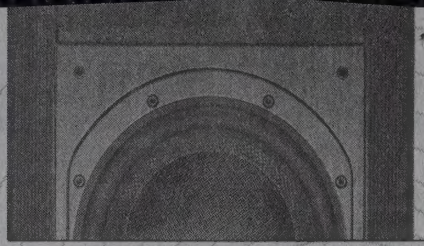

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SPONGEBOB: March release set

FROM PAGE 1

and "The Today Show."

Some commentators read between the lines and claimed Dobson was "outing" SpongeBob, whose show on Nickelodeon regularly draws 3 million viewers. They compared it to the "Teletubbies" scandal of 1999, when the Rev. Jerry Falwell accused the purse-toting children's TV character Tinky-Winky of being gay.

But Focus officials say that no one from their organization, including Dobson, questions SpongeBob's sexuality or the integrity of the popular show.

"We're not taking on SpongeBob here," said Paul Batura, Dobson's personal research assistant. "We've got no problems with any of the characters" in the video.

Focus, in fact, likes SpongeBob, even though the sponge sometimes holds hands with his best friend, Patrick — a habit that has caused some cultural commentators to speculate that SpongeBob is gay.

In Focus' review of "The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie," located on www.pluggedinonline.com, reviewer Marcus Yoars said he liked the movie and shrugged off rumors swirling around the sponge's sexual orientation.

"I've loved the sheer goofiness, buoyancy and straightforwardness of this walking, talking sponge," Yoars wrote.

But like some other conservative groups, including the American Family Association, Focus does have a problem with a video SpongeBob appears in — or rather, what they perceive is the motivation behind the video.

The four-minute music video, sponsored by the New York-based We Are Family Foundation, will be distributed to 61,000 elementary schools March 11 to foster a sense of respect and understanding, its creators say.

Focus believes the characters in the video have been coopted to further what it says is the group's pro-homosexual agenda.

Focus released a statement saying the We Are Family Foundation is "determined to promote the acceptance of homosexuality among our nation's youth."

Although the content of the video is fine, Batura said, he's concerned that an accompanying booklet, which he had not seen, may make reference to sexual orientation.

The booklet, according to a We Are Family Foundation press release, contains lessons to help teachers "put the video's themes of respect, understanding and appreciation of diversity into practice."

"You take a 6- or 7-year-old child, it's hard for them to understand" sexual orientation, Batura said. He says parents, not teachers, should get the first opportunity to talk about the issue of sexual orientation.

But Christine Kaculis, who coordinates publicity for the We Are Family Foundation, said the manuals make no reference to sexual orientation, and she flatly denies that the group promotes homosexual lifestyles.

The group's mission statement, found online at www.wearefamilyfoundation.org, says it supports "programs that inspire and educate individuals of all ages about diversity, understanding, respect and multiculturalism."

The Web site makes one reference to sexual orientation: a "tolerance pledge" that reads, in part, "I pledge to have respect for people whose abilities, beliefs, culture, race, sexual identity or other characteristics are different from my own."

The pledge was created by the Southern Poverty Law Center's National Campaign for Tolerance.

We Are Family Foundation founder Nile Rodgers hypothesized in a Jan. 20 New York Times article that Focus and other concerned groups mixed up the We Are Family Foundation with another group called We Are Family, which provides counseling services for gays and lesbians ages 16 to 23.

Batura says no.

"That reference is sort of a red herring," he said. "We're not at all confused."

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